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Education of the Negro in the United States

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THE EDUCATION OF THE NEGRO IN THE UNITED STATES[1]

THE PROBLEM OF SECURING EQUITABLE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

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IT is the primary purpose of this discussion to give a comprehensive and objective analysis of the problem which the Negro faces in his attempt to secure equitable educational opportunity in the United States of America. It is my specific purpose to define the problem; not to solve it. Accordingly, I shall attempt to suggest the answers to three specific questions: First, what is the comparative educational status of the American Negro to-day? Second, what are some of the basic factors which determine this status? And, third, what steps have been, and are being, taken to improve this status?

In attempting to define or understand the problem which the American Negro faces in his attempt to secure equitable educational opportunity, there are certain basic facts concerning the educational set-up in the United States as a whole which should be kept in mind. First, it should be emphasized that one of the basic assumptions underlying public education in the United States is the doctrine that, among other things, an equitable educational opportunity is the inalienable right of every American child, irrespective of his race, creed or socio-economic status. Second, it should also be remembered that public education in the United States is a function of local support and control. The public school "system" is not *a* system at all, but 48 or more independent school systems supported and controlled by the individual states, and their minor divisions. Third, because of the wide variations in the ability and willingness of local units to support public education, obviously this extreme decentralization creates a problem in providing equitable educational opportunity for American children in general, to say nothing of a disadvantaged minority. A child living in New York State in the industrial East, for example, has five times as much wealth behind his education as that same child would have if he were living in Mississippi in the agricultural South. Moreover, even within the same state just as great or greater disparities are found among the various county units, and just as frequently among the various district units within the same county. Thus, the chances of any American child, whether white or black, to obtain educational opportunity, equal or otherwise, are determined almost

[1] Address delivered at the meeting of the World Federation of Education Associations, from August 10 to 17, 1935, at the University of Oxford, Oxford, England.

exclusively by the section of the country in which he might live, the state in that particular section, the county in that particular state and the district in that particular county.

Unfortunately, 9,000,000 of the 12,000,000 Negroes in the United States live in the agricultural South. The agricultural South, comprising in the main the former slave states, is by far the poorest section of the country, by whatever criterion one may employ—financial, cultural or otherwise. Financially, the South is only about half as wealthy, per capita, as the rest of the nation; culturally, it is even more poverty-stricken; and educationally, it is about where the rest of the country was 15 or 20 years ago. Thus, even if the 9,000,000 Negroes who now reside in the South were white, their chance for educational opportunity would be less than half that of residents in other sections of the country.

But, the peculiar problem which the Negro faces in his attempt to secure equitable educational opportunity arises least of all out of the fact that he lives for the most part in the poorest section of the country. For he is thrice penalized: First, for belonging to the wrong class; second, for belonging to the wrong race; and third, for living in the wrong section of the country.

For historical reasons, which will be discussed presently, the South has insisted upon the establishment and maintenance of separate schools for white and Negro children. This policy has been sustained by the various state and federal courts in numerous decisions affecting the issue. They have consistently held that the individual states have a legal right to establish and maintain separate schools for the various races, *provided,* substantially equal accommodations are furnished each race. Consequently, Negroes are forced by law in 19 of the 48 states and the District of Columbia to attend schools set apart for them. Moreover, this mandatory separation makes easily possible, and there actually occurs, such gross discrimination that the Negro separate schools are almost invariably inferior to the white schools in the same school districts.

Some general idea of the nature and extent of this discrimination may be gleaned from the following facts: In 1930, in those states where separate schools are mandatory, the per capita expenditure for the average white child enrolled in school was $44.31, while the per capita expenditure for each Negro child enrolled was only $12.57. In other words, there was expended on the average Negro child enrolled in school only 28 per cent. as much as was expended on each white child. The range of disparity in expenditures extended all the way from substantial equality in the District of Columbia to only 12 per cent. as much for each Negro child in Mississippi.

As might be expected from the trend of per capita expenditures, Negro schools, in comparison with white schools on all levels, are provided with shorter school terms; with school equipment poorer in quality and less adequate in amount; and with teachers more poorly trained, more poorly paid and less adequate in number. For example, on the elementary school level, the typical Negro school is a one- or two-room structure—a ramshackle, dilapidated affair sadly in need of replacement and insufficient even to "house" the pupils enrolled —some 40 per cent. more classrooms being needed if the Negro pupils enrolled are to have anything approximating even the seating facilities provided for the white pupils in the same communities. The average Negro teacher has 40 per cent. more children; and, although she has 70 per cent. as much training, nevertheless she receives only 41 per cent. as much salary. The school term is 1½ to 2 months shorter —thus making it necessary for the average Negro pupil to spend 9 or 10 years to complete the same curriculum that the white

child in the same community has an opportunity to complete in 8 years.

On the secondary school level, one third (33.5 per cent.) of the white high-school educables are enrolled in high school, while less than one tenth (9.5 per cent.) of the Negro high-school educables are so enrolled. This disparity in high-school enrolment is due mainly to three factors: First, to the poor Negro elementary school just described; second, to the fact that twice as many Negro pupils of high-school age are wage-earners; and third, and most important, to the fact that high-school facilities are not available to Negroes in the same proportion as to whites. In a recent survey, for example, it was found that in 230 counties, although there was at least one high school for whites in each of these counties, yet in not one of these counties was there a single high school for Negroes —and, this, despite the fact that approximately 160,000 (158,939) Negro pupils of high-school age resided there, and despite the fact that in no county was the Negro population less than one eighth of the total population. And even where high-school facilities are provided, the same gross disparities in school equipment, number and training of teachers and in length of school term are found as were observed in the case of the elementary school.

On the college and university level, the same sort of situation obtains—only it is more acute because it inherits the cumulative deficiencies of the two lower schools. There are approximately 250,000 white students in colleges in the South, as compared with less than 25,000 Negro students, although the ratio of whites to Negroes in this area is only 3 or 4 to 1. On the average, the states provide for 16 white students in higher institutions supported by state funds to each Negro student provided for in similarly supported institutions—ranging from 6 to 1 in North Carolina to 39 to 1 in Texas. The majority of all the white college students in this area (56 per cent.) are receiving their education in state-supported colleges and universities, while only two fifths of the Negro students are enrolled in similar institutions. In addition to these facts, it should be observed that there is not a single state-supported institution in this area where a Negro may pursue graduate or professional education, although in these same states, in 1930, there were approximately 11,000 (11,037) white students pursuing graduate and professional education at public expense.

These facts reveal that the separate Negro school, although it is legal only when substantially equal facilities are provided, is unmistakably the occasion and the instrument of gross discrimination in the provision of publicly supported education for whites and Negroes in these states. While Negroes have some occasion to rejoice that their schools have steadily improved for the past 30 years, nevertheless, as far as educational opportunity equal to that provided for whites is concerned, the little advance that Negro schools have made is like the progress of an ox-cart compared with that of an automobile. For example, in 1900 the discrimination in per capita expenditure for white and Negro pupils was only 60 per cent. in favor of the white pupils, but, by 1930, this disparity had increased to the almost incredible extent of 253 per cent. Moreover, this almost incredible increase in the disparity between white and Negro schools occurred, despite the fact that public school revenues in these states have increased some eight- or ten-fold, and despite the fact that the relationship between the races is alleged to have been tremendously improved. Thus, four fifths of the Negroes in the United States find themselves forced by law to attend schools set apart for them, which are almost invariably characterized by such notorious and increasing discrimination that, until this situation is remedied, they have no chance

of securing educational opportunity equal in any respect to that enjoyed by whites in the same communities.

The other one fifth of the Negro population live in the northern and western sections of the country. Their problem of securing equitable educational opportunity is, in the main, only different in degree from that of the majority who reside in the southern section, just described. For the most part, they are illegally segregated for educational purposes—and in some cases legally, by permissive legislation—but they receive educational accommodations more nearly substantially equal to those of the whites than is true in the South.

From this brief summary description it is obvious that the crux of the Negro's attempt to obtain equitable educational opportunity is the separate Negro school. Not only does it permit and encourage gross discrimination, but as an instrument of social policy it connotes and enforces an inferior status, which in itself is the very antithesis of equal opportunity, educational or otherwise. However, the separate Negro school is not an isolated phenomenon. In fact, it is hardly a phenomenon at all. It is rather a symbol of the inferior social, economic and political status of the Negro in American life in general; and, as such, his inferior educational opportunities are to be explained in terms of this status.

As far as economic status is concerned, the American Negro is the mud-sill of our present economic order. According to the Federal Census for 1930, of the 5½ million Negroes gainfully occupied, 83 per cent. were farmers, workers in industry and domestic workers, as compared with only 55 per cent. of the native white population engaged in such occupations. Thus, Negroes are engaged, in considerably greater proportion, in the most poorly paid and unstable occupations in the country, and the large majority of them are thereby forced to live on or below the subsistence level, even in normal times. They are the most economically insecure group in America to-day. They are the "last hired and the first fired." When depression comes, as it did, they are the first fired not only because they are Negroes but because they are also engaged in labor that can be most easily dispensed with. Accordingly, at the present time, while 20 to 25 per cent. of the white workers are unemployed, we find roughly 40 to 50 per cent., or twice as many, Negroes without employment.

As far as political status is concerned, the American Negro is a quasi-alien in his native land. Legally, he has the right to vote, hold office and perform every other duty and enjoy every other privilege incident to American citizenship. And, while the small minority living in the northern, western and border states do actually exercise their suffrage rights—in one state electing a Negro congressman, and in several other states electing Negroes to the State legislature and to other local offices—nevertheless, in the South, where the majority of the Negroes live, they have been practically disfranchised by discrimination, intimidation and the Democratic primary. Thus, they have little or no voice in the management of the political units in which they reside. The political machinery is run by the white people and mainly for the white people in the communities in which it exists. As a consequence, they get inferior school facilities, inferior sanitation, little or no police protection; in fact, little or none of the conveniences which other taxpayers in the community expect and get.

Obviously, the Negro's inferior status is by no means an accident; it is the result of a studied and deliberate attempt on the part of the white majority to restrict the Negro minority to an inferior caste status. Quite naturally, slavery has had much to do with this development. For even before the slaves were emancipated, the seeds of enmity and hate had sprung up, growing

out of the economic competition of the "poor whites" and the slaves in the South, on the one hand, and the free Negro workman and white worker in the North, on the other.

The general political effect of emancipation in the South was the decline of the political monopoly of the slave-holding aristocracy and the increasing and ultimate ascendancy of the "poor whites." By the late nineties the governmental machinery of the former slave states was almost entirely in the hands of the "poor whites"—the bitter and uncompromising enemy of the Negro during slavery. Thus, their new power was employed in the paradoxical attempt to improve their own status by degrading the status of the Negro. Their motto was: "Keep the Negro in his place" —which meant any place that would leave no doubt in any one's mind that the Negro was supposed to be an inferior caste. In addition, as pointed out by Du Bois in his "Black Reconstruction,"[2] " . . . a determined psychology of caste was built up. In every possible way it was impressed and advertised that the white was superior and the Negro an inferior race. This inferiority must be publicly acknowledged and submitted to. Titles of courtesy were denied colored men and women. Certain signs of servility and usages amounting to public and personal insult were insisted upon. The most educated and deserving black man was compelled in many public places to occupy a place beneath the lowest and least deserving of the whites." And I might add that this sort of psychology continues to be emphasized, in more subtle form, in the public press, over the radio, on the cinema screen and even in the halls of learning.

Under such conditions as we have just described, it is perfectly clear why the comparative educational status of the Negro is so low. And, it is equally obvious that he will not obtain educational opportunity, equal in any respect to that of his white "neighbors," until he achieves a socio-economic-political status that more nearly approaches theirs.

What steps have been, and are being, taken to improve the status of the Negro in the American social order? Quite obviously, the Negro has not stood idly by and accepted the inferior status that has been, and is being, foisted upon him. On the contrary, he has put forth, and is still putting forth, some rather strenuous efforts in opposition. While the following five general movements do not explicitly cover all the detailed activities in this sphere, yet they are sufficiently typical and general to give a fairly comprehensive understanding of the final aspect of the problem which the Negro faces in his effort to secure equitable educational opportunity.

One of the first and most obvious steps minority groups have employed to improve their status is migration. As far as the American Negro is concerned, migration has been characterized by two phases. The first phase began even before emancipation, in the form of colonization movements to other countries. The effort and subsequent failure to colonize the free Negro in Liberia and in other countries will readily be recalled.

The second and the more significant phase has been the migration of Negroes from the southern farms and rural areas to the cities of both the North and South. Since 1900, "over a million Negroes have migrated to Southern cities; while a million and a half have gone to urban areas of the North." This urbanization of the Negro has had several important effects upon his status. First, even in southern cities, the Negro's life is freer and safer; the very nature of the urban environment has made it impossible to subject him to the same restrictions and to enforce the same racial

[2] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Black Reconstruction," New York, 1935.

taboos which are possible in the villages and rural areas. Moreover, it is not without significance that the majority of lynchings occur in the small towns and villages. Second, urbanization has increased the stratification of the Negro population. Third, the very act of moving from the country to the city, even in the South, gives the Negro better schools. And, in the northern cities, while in many instances his children are still forced to go to separate schools, nevertheless they receive educational accommodations, substantially equal to those of the whites.

A second type of effort put forth in behalf of the Negro might be generally designated as interracial activities, and is best typified by the activities of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the various philanthropic agencies, such as the General Education Board, the Rosenwald Fund, the Jeanes and Slater Funds and the Phelps-Stokes Fund.[3]

The personnel of these organizations is generally interracial, the majority being white. Their program is frankly conservative and opportunistic, being confined almost entirely to the correction of the more flagrant instances of abuse and to attempts to get the "better" class of whites to appreciate the assets of the Negro group in their midst.

Without any intention of disparaging the efforts of such praiseworthy organizations, any objective appraisal forces the conclusion that they fall far short of making any fundamental change in the status of the American Negro. For, in the first place, their efforts do not reach the large mass of whites, who constitute the real basis of the race problem in America; and, in the second place, these organizations either do not possess the power or do not dare or care to use it, to change the status of the Negro in any fundamental sense.

As far as improving the educational level of Negroes is concerned, much has been done by the philanthropic agencies with the little money at their disposal. But, when it is considered that it would cost $200,000,000 more than is now being spent on Negro schools in the South merely to raise them to the present level of the white schools in the same areas, and an additional $50,000,000 a year to keep them there, one gains some idea of the inadequacy of the 10 or 12 million dollars now being spent each year on Negro schools and other activities by these agencies. Nor can we find comfort in the thought that the philanthropy of these agencies is stimulating a fairer spirit on the part of the white officials who disburse the public school funds. For, during the past 30 years, as already noted, the discrimination between the expenditures on white and Negro schools, instead of decreasing, has increased over fourfold.

A third effort by Negroes to improve their status grows out of the fact that, in a democratic government, the normal means of expressing approval and voicing protest reside in the citizens' right to vote and resort to the courts. Thus, from the beginning, the Negro has resorted to the political machinery of the state in an effort to improve his lot. It has already been noted that only in the northern and border states do Negroes have the opportunity to resort to the ballot, to any appreciable extent. And here, they do use their ballot fairly effectively in improving their status.

It will be recalled that, in the South, where the majority of the Negroes live, some 90 per cent. of them are disfranchised. As a consequence, they have been forced to substitute the complex and expensive process of litigation for the ballot box. What other groups have been and are able to do

[3] Other organizations whose activities should be included under this head are: the interracial departments of the Y. M. C. A. and the Y. W. C. A., interracial work of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America and the National Urban League.

through exercise of their suffrage rights, these Negroes have tried and are trying to do by resort to the courts.

Since 1865, Negroes have brought some 225 cases before the state and federal higher courts. These cases have been primarily concerned with an attempt to remove such curtailments and deprivations of their civil liberties as exclusion from jury service; segregation in schools, on common carriers and in public places; residential segregation; disfranchisement; laws against intermarriage; and legal segregation accompanied by discrimination in accommodations. In 94, or approximately 42 (41.7) per cent., of these cases, the decision has been in favor of the Negro. The courts have ruled rather consistently, however, that without contravening any of the Negro's rights as a citizen, the states may legally make race distinctions but not race discriminations.

Despite the rather obvious and important limitations of court action, many Negroes, represented chiefly by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, feel that the advantages gained outweigh any of the disadvantages that may and do accrue. In fact, they contend that, in many instances, the Negro has no other choice. For, in the first place, it is the only alternative at his command which can challenge in any effective manner some of the more flagrant and immediate abuses which he suffers under the policy and practice of segregation. In the second place, they point out that the Negro has gained favorable decisions in 42 per cent. of the cases he has brought; and, as far as circumvention of decisions is concerned, it is not a universal practice. And, in the third place, they contend that court action is one of the most effective means Negroes have at their disposal for making and remaking public opinion, as the Scottsboro case so eloquently testifies.

A fourth effort on behalf of the Negro to improve his status is the attempt to enlist his cooperation and affiliation with various aspects of the radical labor movement in the country, such as socialism and particularly communism. The philosophy and programs of the various elements of this movement are well known. Efforts on behalf of the Negro, particularly communistic, have included a wide variety of projects, ranging all the way from the very immediate and practical activities of insisting upon the removal of the color bar and color discrimination in trade unions and other workers' organizations to the utopian proposal of a Negro socialist state in the black-belt of the South.

Without attempting to prophesy, even by implication, the future value of this movement as a means of improving the American Negro's status, it should be pointed out that the following are some of the factors which undoubtedly account, in large part, for its indifferent or little success up to the present: First, in the United States, it has not been possible to develop a radical class-consciousness even among white workers; in fact, they are hardly organization-conscious, since less than one fourth of the 25,000,000 organizable white workers are organized. Second, the assumption that "the cause of the Negro's inferior position in American life is primarily economic, and only, secondarily, if at all, racial" has not proved to be a realistic comprehension of the problem. For, despite the obvious identity of the economic interests of white and black workers, and despite the good intentions of the leaders of the movement, the majority of white workers, dominated more by race prejudice than class consciousness, have rather persistently refused to unite on any other basis than subordination of the Negro. Third, and in view of these facts, Negroes have refused to be the spearhead of the attack, for fear lest while they are fighting a class war from the front they will be subject to a race attack from the rear.

A final movement by Negroes to improve

their status grows out of the fact that they are forced to live a highly segregated life throughout the country in general. The idea has been urged that Negroes should make a virtue of their necessity; that they should capitalize their segregation to improve their status, by developing economic and cultural self-sufficiency. Thus, Negroes have elected, or have been forced, to attempt to build a little Negro society, in every essential respect a replica of the dominant social organization around them. With the idea of developing an independent black economy, they have developed a number of Negro business enterprises of one sort or another. Through the necessity of cultural survival, they have developed their own institutions, such as the church, the press, and the school. And, at least one serious suggestion has been made that a similar procedure be employed to regain the franchise.[4]

Despite the fact that this movement has given opportunity for the development of Negro leadership and has given considerable opportunity for cultural attainment, yet it is clear to most intelligent Negroes that the ultimate end of such efforts is, and must be, an economic and cultural cul-de-sac. For, in the first place, with "credit, basic industry, and the state" controlled by whites, the limitations of an independent black economy are obvious. And, in the second place, the fact that "cultures develop by constant borrowing and adaptation, rather than by isolated evolution of some unique racial quality" suggests that cultural self-sufficiency is merely the beginning of cultural decadence. Moreover, it appears fairly clear that as long as the Negro is a minority group in America, segregation will not only carry with it the stigma of inferiority, whether justified or not; but will leave an easily identifiable and relatively impotent minority exposed to any and all sorts of discriminatory and predatory practices by a dominant and ruthless majority.

Accordingly, the American Negro is confronted by the dilemma of segregation. He finds himself apparently faced by immediate economic and cultural degradation, if he does not develop his separate life and institutions; and he perceives that the more self-sufficient he makes his separate institutions, apparently the further he moves away from his ultimate goal of full participation in American life on equal terms with any other citizen, regardless of color. Because the Negro does not, in most cases, have a choice between segregation and non-segregation, his real problem is: Given segregation as a fact, how can he use it as a means to his ultimate goal? Thus, the Negro is forced into the paradoxical position of building up his segregated life and institutions with one hand, and fighting against the necessity for them with the other. Hence, the improvement of his status in the American social order in general, as well as his advance toward more equitable educational opportunity is primarily conditioned by his success in this effort.

It is obvious from the brief survey which I have attempted to give that the problem which the American Negro faces in his attempt to secure equitable educational opportunity for his children is not an isolated phenomenon; it is an integral part of the Negro's struggle for status in American life in general. The extent to which he will secure educational opportunity equal in

[4] Dr. Raymond Leslie Buell, of the Foreign Policy Association, in an address (in Washington, D. C.) last spring suggested that the way out for the Negro, in the South, politically, consisted in devising a scheme whereby Negroes would be allowed proportional representation in the various political units; whereby Negroes would vote only for Negroes, and whites, only for whites; and presumably whereby Negroes would vote only on those measures affecting Negroes, and whites, only on those affecting whites.

any respect to his white "neighbors" is dependent upon the extent to which he can achieve a status more nearly approaching theirs. The efforts by and on behalf of the Negro to improve his status have been and are many and varied. Many of them have been and are sentimental, without much regard for, or comprehension of, the reality of the problem; many of them have been and are decidedly opportunistic, without any, or due, regard for their ultimate consequences; and many of them have been and are based upon high ideals and a realistic approach to the question. But it is equally clear that none of them has solved the problem, and all of them may be necessary.

ARGONAUTS OF 1935[1]

By Superintendent EDWIN A. LEE
SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

DURING the full of the moon in August it was my privilege to witness the Old Spanish Days Fiesta in Santa Barbara. In that lovely city by the sea, for three days we lived in the past. Costumes were of other days. Women rode in carriages such as most of you have never seen. Stage-coaches such as I remember from my early boyhood in Shasta County carried descendants of early Californians, even as they had carried the fathers and mothers of those pioneer days. I wish I could picture to you the delight with which we experienced these sights and sounds of days long gone. There is a glamor and a fascination linked with pioneering, especially in California, that words can not describe. One must live it to know it.

This autumn in San Francisco we shall celebrate the founding of our beloved city, an event which transpired one hundred years ago. In Portsmouth Square, in the shadow of the monument to Robert Louis Stevenson, for a few days we San Franciscans shall live again in the past. We shall see the brave Richardson, under the inspiration of Jose Figueroa, select his lot at a point which is now Grant Avenue, between Clay and Washington, and build thereon the first habitation, half tent and half house, constructed in Yerba Buena. We shall feel the loneliness and the terror of that little family as it took up its abode in what after all was wilderness. You smile at the idea! Listen to this description of what is now a modern city, as reported by Hittell in his history of California.

The original condition of the place was well described by Alfred Robinson. The vessel in which he came to the country in 1829, anchored in the cove between North Point and Rincon Point, afterwards specially known as Yerba Buena cove. He and several others landed at North Point for the purpose of making a visit to Santa Clara. They found horses from the neighboring mission ready for them at the beach in charge of a vaquero, who was to act as guide. They mounted and started off, but soon found themselves in a dense thicket, where the trail was narrow and the trees and bushes on both sides so intermingled their branches above them as to endanger their heads as they rode along. And thus they proceeded, sometimes crossing little valleys where the coyote prowled, and sometimes rising sandy eminences where a glimpse was caught of the neighboring bay. Through the woods resounded the howl of the wolf; and the heavy track of the grizzly bear lay printed in their course. At length after a circuitous ride of several miles, they saw through an opening in the thicket the Mission Dolores—its dark-tiled roofs and dilapidated walls well comporting with what appeared to them the bleak and cheerless scenery by which it was surrounded.

Yes, pioneering holds an allure which makes the heart beat faster and the breath come quickly. Every man and woman at some time or other has bowed to the spell of high adventure, and poor in spirit indeed is he who does not respond with a thrill to the tales of those who came before us.

Has it entered your mind that you who are the first students of the San Francisco Junior College are pioneers? Has it come to you that you and the faculty are to-day entering upon a high adventure?

One year ago the thought of a junior college

[1] Address before the Junior College student body, San Francisco, August 26, 1935.